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| Professional Development and Mentoring |
| Professional Development and Mentoring: Effects on Teacher Knowledge and Classroom Practice |
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| **EDP 631 article draft** |

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| ABSTRACT: This article seeks to examine literature that describes mentoring as a viable professional development model to support teacher quality. By illustrating the link between coursework and individualized, onsite mentoring research demonstrates change that occurs in both teacher knowledge and classroom practice, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for children in early childhood classrooms. |

Introduction – Teacher Quality in Early Childhood Education

Research indicates there are positive impacts on children’s learning when strategic investments are made in early education (Dickenson & Tabors, 2002; Barnett, 2004; Raudenbush, 2009). This investment can be a way to both *increase* teacher quality in early learning environments; as well as prove to be a powerful equalizer by *decreasing* the glaring ethnic and racial gaps in children’s school readiness (Brooks-Gunn, 2005, Raudenbush, 2009).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2001) states that early childhood educators must know how to: promote child learning by creating developmentally appropriate environments, to build relationships with family and community as a way to collaborate in children’s learning, to observe, document, and assess children’s learning, and to utilize a wide array of educational approaches to build a meaningful curriculum.

With a growing body of evidence from the field indicating that early exposure to oral language and literacy skills places young children at an advantage for later reading achievement, policy makers have been pushed to institute new initiatives that change instructional practices in early childhood programs (Justice & Vukelich, 2008). States have begun to develop early learning standards detailing what young children should know and be able to do prior to entering kindergarten and under George W. Bush’s administration the “Good Start, Grow Smart” initiative, Early Reading First was implemented to “transform existing early education programs into centers of excellence that provide high-quality, early education to young children, especially those from low-income families. The overall purpose of the Early Reading First Program is to prepare young children to enter kindergarten with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills to prevent reading difficulties and ensure school success” (USDOE, ERF).

In an era of states adopting quality rating systems and high-stakes assessment of preschool quality (Dickenson, 2006; Barnett, 2004), Barnett (2004) asks, “If a college degree is considered essential for teaching 5 year olds in kindergarten, why isn’t it required for teaching 3- and 4-year olds?” (p.2). He goes on to state that the minimum qualification for a preschool teacher should be a four-year degree with specialized training teaching young children.

The reality of the early childhood education system is that less than half of the lead teachers working with 3 and 4 year children have a 4-year degree (Saluja et al. 2002). Since the quality of staff working with children in programs has a major impact on the quality of education, care, and early learning experiences of children (Barnett, 2003), there is an urgency in not just supporting, but of improving the early childhood professional development system. A growing body of evidence suggests that programs that provide teachers with on-site mentoring, consultation, and technical assistance are linked to better teaching practices and learning environments for young children (Ackerman, 2004; Stanulis & Floden, 2009). The use of mentoring to improve teacher qualifications allows the Professional Development system to positively impact early childhood programs without depending entirely on higher education (Ryan et al. 2004).

This study will review current research that demonstrates the relationship between mentoring, teacher quality, and early learning experiences for young children. We will begin by defining the mentoring process, and then we will contextualize the impact of mentoring on teacher quality. We will conclude by comparing these findings to an Early Childhood Educator’s Professional Development (ECEPD) research project in Providence, RI (USDOE, 2006) to elaborate on current research and to provide additional insight on mentoring in early childhood programs in Head Start classrooms, urban-based community programs, as well as family child care homes.

Historical Perspective of Mentoring – Literature, Business, and Education

Onchwari and Keengwe (2008) have traced the concept of Mentoring back to ancient Greece. In Homer’s *Odyssey,* Odysseus’ son Telemachus “receives care and counsel from a family friend Mentor while Odysseus is away in the siege of Troy” (p. 20).

“The central quality of mentoring has evolved from Odysseus’s act of bestowing an individual with the responsibility for nurturing, educating, advising, and protecting his son. Following this model, mentoring has often been portrayed as an intentional, nurturing, instructive, and supportive activity by an older, more experienced person that helps shape the growth and development of a younger, less experienced person” (Onchwari & Keengwe, p. 20).

This same nurturing and supportive role has been a guiding principle in the business world over the last forty years. Mentoring from a business perspective has long been regarded as a process that “plays a significant role in the career, retention, and leadership development of employees” and has long been thought to “dramatically enhance employee skills and motivation” (Ochwari et al., p. 20).

These same benefits can be seen in teacher education programs. “Particularly in early childhood education, mentoring provides a means for teachers to enhance their skills. (Ochwari et al., p. 20). Mentoring can also be a viable tool to accelerate the education reform process (Washington et al., 2009; Maynard and Furlong, 1993) as it can be an effective way to train teachers to adopt new practices (Weaver, 2004); and it provides a way by which professional development “can be made available to teachers on a continual basis” (Tugel, 2004). Through mentoring, a learning opportunity is created “in which an experienced colleague, the mentor, socializes the learner or protégé to the larger context of an organization, profession, or industry” (Sisakhti 1998, p. 57). This Vygotskian-like concept illustrates the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where there is a complimentary relationship between someone who is less experienced paired with “a more knowing other” (Vygotsky, 19\_\_) as a tool to move learning forward.

Definition of Mentoring as Professional Development

We have adopted the definition of professional development employed by Weber and Trauten (2008) in a review of research on raising the quality of the Early Care and Education workforce: as a “collection of activities through which teachers/caregivers gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will produce positive child outcomes.” The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1996) has also recommended an investment in quality teaching by providing professional development activities that occur in a teacher’s workday through joint planning, study groups, peer coaching, and research.

Mentoring is a “relationship-based” model of professional development that is dependent on relationships between more and less skilled practitioners in an effort to increase a teacher’s knowledge base, change teaching behavior, and enhance professional practice (Weber and Trauten, 2008). In this article, we will use the term “mentor” to refer to the early childhood educator employed to connect early childhood education (ECE) content to classroom practice.

Research on Mentoring to Improve Teacher Quality

For over thirty years, early childhood education researchers and child care and preschool practitioners have been trying to link high quality professional development with improved program quality, changes in practitioner skills and knowledge, and enhanced child outcomes. Research has shown that individual workshop sessions and many intervention projects are not likely to create significant changes in teaching practice (Mensies, Mahdavi, & Lewis, 2008). Current approaches to ECE professional development propose that projects are most effective when new ideas and practices are linked to the particular ECE setting and to the practitioner’s specific needs (Grace, Bordelon, Cooper, & Kazelskis, 2008). There is an emerging body of evidence that professional development can be effective if it is tied to specific content, aligned with the curriculum and standards used in the setting, and if it includes coaching or mentoring on how to apply specific practices (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2008). The inclusion of mentoring in professional development programs is supported by research demonstrating that training and education interventions that include mentoring can have a greater impact on teacher behavior and on child outcomes than the training/education component alone (Weber & Trauten, 2008). In a recent study, home-based and center-based practitioners who participated in either a professional development course alone or in the control of no intervention scored significantly lower on the quality of their language and literacy practices than the treatment group that received the credit-bearing course and ongoing mentoring support. It was the work of the mentors that made a positive contribution to scores from classroom environment assessments (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). Programs that provide teachers with on-site mentoring, consultations, and technical assistance are linked to better practice and learning environments for young children (Ackerman, 2004; Stanulis & Floden, 2009).

A Local Professional Development Model

We do not need to go beyond our own city limits to find early childhood educators, and the families and children they serve, facing serious challenges when it comes to educating our youngest children. Providence is a city of 180,000 people (Census, 2006) where 41% of its children live in poverty. 36% are born to mothers who have dropped out of school, and 25% of the households do not speak English. The most alarming statistic is how much poorer families have become in recent years. In 1990, Providence ranked 25th in terms of child poverty. By 2000, we were 3rd with the largest increase of any city in the country. This increase has been linked to the steady decline in good-paying manufacturing jobs at a time when the city has become home to immigrants predominantly from Central America, the Caribbean, and West Africa. The local landscape mirrors the national statistics as the “number of language minority children in K-12 schools has been recently estimated to be over 14 million” (August and Shanahan, 2006). And the National Reading Council (2008) identified the greatest concentration of English language learners in U.S. schools are found in early education (p. 248).

Research shows that poverty is a reliable predictor of children’s readiness for school (Snow, 2001; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). Providence has evidence to support this finding. The city is home to 20% of the state’s kindergarten population (PPSD, 2005). According to 2005 Providence Public School Department data, 45% of those children entering kindergarten had scores that fell below the benchmark for a literacy screening assessment (PPSD, 2005, PALS-K). This trend continues as children move along their academic careers as the city’s 2006 New England Common Assessment Program scores indicate that only 29% of 3rd graders were proficient in reading and 35% in writing. In 2005, 84% of the schools in Providence were classified as “in need of improvement”.

Prior to embarking on their formal education journey, children who are residents of Providence, are part of the state’s largest early care and education system. The city accounts for 30% of the State’s entire regulated early education available slots with 54% of those child care slots allotted to home-based learning environments and 18% to center-based classrooms. Of those children in Rhode Island who receive child care subsidy by the Child Care and Development Block Grant, 42% are served by early childhood educators (ECEs) in Providence.

This information speaks to the urgency of not just supporting, but improving the city’s early childhood system. It highlights the need to raise the level of teacher quality in early care and education settings.

In response to these trends, The Providence Plan – a nonprofit established to improve the social and economic well-being of Providence residents and its neighborhoods – convened community stakeholders to explore the need for a citywide school readiness initiative. The result of that planning process was the creation of Ready to Learn Providence (R2LP) in 2002, a community coalition with a vision that *all children in Providence will enter school healthy and ready to learn.* R2LP has created social networks among early childhood educators, librarians from the Providence Public Library, public school teachers, health care professionals, and families. Their collaborative efforts have focused on three areas: advancing children’s early literacy skills, enhancing the quality of early education through professional development for teachers, and implementing a transition to kindergarten initiative to improve linkages between early education and public school.

In 2004, R2LP completed a needs assessment of the city’s early care and education system. The report, *How Ready is Providence? Advancing a Community Conversation on School Readiness*, revealed major gaps in the current design and delivery of professional development. Limitations cited included: rigor of content, the depth, dosage and duration of interventions, accessibility of training, and the lack of available language options to support early childhood educators own professional development.

R2LP provides high-quality professional development to early childhood educators to improve the quality of educational experiences for preschoolers throughout the city. They focus their efforts on early childhood educators in an effort to positively impact teacher practices and create classrooms of excellence. R2LP has adopted a professional development methodology that stresses *depth, dosage, and duration*. Coursework is rigorous and allows participants the time to apply newly acquired skills, to reflect on what they have learned, and to share their experiences with their peers. Since 2002, R2LP has conducted 47,000 hours of professional development with an average intervention of 43 hours per participant.

The next section describes a randomized-control study that looks at the relationship between professional development and on-site mentoring support with early childhood educators’ classroom literacy practices.

R2LP’s Early Childhood Educators Professional Development Grant

In 2006, R2LP was awarded an Early Childhood Educator’s Professional Development (ECEPD) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. It represents a three year study to test the effectiveness of providing early childhood professionals in the urban core (Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls) of Rhode Island with an intensive year-long intervention that includes two 15-week, three college credit literacy courses and six visits from a literacy mentor. The intervention’s goal was to enhance early childhood educators’ classroom literacy practices and to, in turn, impact the literacy development of the children in their care. Teachers and students recruited for this project live and work in neighborhoods identified as some of the most socioeconomically distressed within Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls.

During the 2007-08 academic year, 224 early childhood teachers were recruited and randomly assigned to one of two groups (treatment or control). The treatment group attended two 15-week courses and received six 3-hour, on-site mentor visits to support changes to teachers’ literacy practices. The control group received no intervention from ECEPD staff, with the promise of enrolling in the intervention during the 2008-09 academic year.

The two 45-hour literacy courses, one a video-based intervention called *Heads Up! Reading*, developed by the National Head Start Association; followed by the *Early Literacy Curriculum for Young Children* using the *Opening the World of Learning* (OWL) curriculum as its base, enabled teachers to earn 6 undergraduate or graduate credit. Both courses were delivered in separate English and Spanish classes. A key element in realizing the implementation of theory were the six onsite mentor visits that totaled 18 hours of individualized professional development.

How Mentors Spend Their Time in Classrooms

Each of the six mentor visits had specific literacy goals attached to them that correlated to what teachers were learning in their course work. These visits were a time to build on relationships, meet teachers where they were at in their own professional development, with the goal of moving all teachers forward in their classroom literacy practices. Mentors followed a protocol that included: Classroom Observation, Observation Feedback, Early Literacy Planning, Implementation/Demonstration, Relationship Building, and Reflection.

How mentors spent their time in the mentoring cycle differed by setting (Head Start, community-based classrooms, or family child care providers). Center-based mentors appear to have spent less time than mentors working in homes on planning visits and more time was spent analyzing an observation with a teacher. Center-based teachers devoted the greatest time to Observation and Feedback with less time devoted to Relationship Building, Reflection, and Implementation/Demonstration.

In Head Start classrooms mentors recorded the least time on demonstrating and implementing classroom literacy activities while home-based mentors consistently devoted a large part of their visits to implementing and demonstrating activities. While mentors in homes spent a large amount of time building their relationship with the practitioner when compared to their center-based colleagues.

Across all six classroom visits, topics that accounted for the greatest amount of mentor time working with teachers were: books, alphabet knowledge, writing, and vocabulary. While the content areas of: concepts of print, English Language Learners, and phonological awareness received the least amount of time.

Conclusion

Research and experience have demonstrated that the use of mentoring is an integral component of early childhood educators’ professional development. Mentoring provides the link between pedagogical theory learned in college courses with the implementation of “lessons learned” to enhance both classroom practices and children’s learning outcomes. Yet, hidden within the model of Mentoring are still many concepts to capture, analyze, and have influence teacher preparation. Additional studies should explore the qualitative aspects of the mentor-teacher relationship. How time spent with resistant educators differs from time spent with teachers who are committed to self-reflection and change. Another question still left to answer is the adequate dosage of mentoring in a professional development model. If six visits is perhaps not enough to impact child-level outcomes, how many will help to ensure each child’s success?

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APPENDIXES

A. Characteristics of teachers in ECEPD Spring 2008

B. Research Design

APPENDIX A

Characteristics of teachers in ECEPD Spring 2008

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All | | Treatment | | Control | |
| Frequency | Percent% | Frequency | Percent% | Frequency | Percent% |
| Teachers in Spring 2008  N | 106 | 100.0 | 58 | 54.7 | 48 | 45.3 |
| Classroom type  Community Center  Home-based child care  Head Start | 28  31  47 | 26.4  29.2  44.3 | 15  18  25 | 25.9  31.0  43.1 | 13  13  22 | 27.1  27.1  45.8 |
| Education  Master’s degree  Bachelor’s degree  Associate’s degree  Some college  High School/GED  Less than High School  Other  Missing | 2  20  28  21  23  6  2  4 | 1.9  18.9  26.4  19.8  21.7  5.7  1.9  3.8 | 1  10  12  17  12  4  0  2 | 1.7  17.2  20.7  29.3  20.7  6.9  0.0  3.4 | 1  10  16  4  11  2  2  2 | 2.1  20.8  33.3  8.3  22.9  4.2  4.2  4.2 |
| Centers/Settings in Spring 2008  N | 55 | 100.0 | 36 | 100.0 | 30 | 100.0 |
| Classroom type  Community Center  Home-based child care  Head Start | 17  31  7 | 30.9  56.4  12.7 | 11  18  7 | 30.6  50.0  19.4 | 11  13  6 | 36.7  43.3  20.0 |

Source: R2LP ECEPD database as of December 3, 2008.

APPENDIX B Research Design

Two cohorts

Same intervention

Descriptive analysis of outcomes on two cohorts

Quantitative

Data

Intervention

Variable:

Type of classroom

Intervention Timeline